



Chaunak Not In Tnach

The Story

The *Gemara* in *Masechet Shabbat* (21b) teaches us about the *yomtov* of *Chanukah*. The *Gemara* introduces its narrative by asking “*mai Chanukah* – what is *Chanukah*?” and then continues to describe what actually happened: On the twenty-fifth of *Kislev* commence the eight days of *Chanukah*, during which we are forbidden to fast or eulogise. This is because when the Syrian Greeks entered the holy *Bet Hamikdash*, they contaminated all the flasks of oil that were there. When the *Chashmonayim* overcame them and gained the upper hand, they searched the *Bet Hamikdash* and only found one flask of oil with the *kohen gadol*'s seal still intact. This flask contained enough oil to kindle the *menorah* for just one day. A miracle happened, and they were able to light the *Menorah* from it for eight days, (until they were able to bring fresh, ritually-pure oil.) In recognition of this miracle, the following year, the *Chashmonaim* and *Sanhedrin* established these eight days as a *yomtov*, with respect to reciting *Hallel* and *Hodaah*, giving thanks to *Hashem*.

“*Mai Chanukah*?”

To enable us to understand this *Gemara*, there are a number of points which need addressing:

- What is the question “*mai Chanukah*”, “what is *Chanukah*?” We do not find our Sages asking this question concerning other *chagim*. *Rashi* (*ibid.*) comments that the *Gemara*'s question is not to be taken literally, as if we do not know what *Chanukah* is. Rather, the question is, due to which miracle did *Chazal* fix this *yomtov*? What is *Rashi* coming to teach us by saying this?
- The *Gemara* continues by describing the miracle, that one flask of oil sufficed to light the *Menorah* for eight days, instead of one, as expected. Then it says that *Chazal* fixed these days as a *yomtov* for *hallel* and *hodaah*. *Rashi* explains that *hallel* is recited, and “*al hanissim*” is said in the *brachah* of *hodaah* (of *shemoneh esreh*). What is interesting is that the *Gemara* emphasizes the miracle of the oil, but not the miracles of the war. And even so, the *yomtov* was not fixed by *Chazal* in regard to lighting the *menorah*. Although we do commemorate the miracle of the oil, *Chazal* did not make this the essence of *Chanukah*, only *hallel* and *hodaah*.
- Additionally, *Rashi* later on (24a) comments that the main theme of *Chanukah* is *hodaah, al hanissim*, which relates to the miracle of the wars, even though the *Gemara* emphasized the miracle of the *menorah* being lit for eight days.



- According to *Rashi*, why does the *Gemara* not mention the *mitzvah* of lighting the *menorah* for eight days, as part of the theme of *Chanukah*?

Before addressing our questions on *Rashi*, let us try to understand the *Rambam's* opinion as well.

- The *Rambam's* title for the *halachot* of *Chanukah* differs from that given for the other *chagim* (see *Mishnah Torah, hilchot Megillah* and *Chanukah*). The *halachot* of other *chagim*, such as *Pesach, Sukkot, Rosh Hashanah* and *Purim*, are named after their *mitzvot*. However, regarding *Chanukah*, the *Rambam* calls them *hilchot Chanukah*, and not *hilchot menorah*. And even the title, "*hilchot megillah* and *Chanukah*" does not seem to be consistent. Either call it "*hilchot Purim* and *Chanukah*" or "*hilchot megillah* and *menorah*"?
- The *Gemara* writes that *Chanukah* was fixed as a *yomtov* for *hallel* and *hodaah*. Yet the *Rambam* does not mention the *hodaah* of "*al hanissim*" in the *halachot* of *Chanukah*, only in *hilchot tefillah* (2:13) and *hilchot berachot* (2:6). So how does the *Rambam* interpret the *hodaah* of the *Gemara*?
- Additionally, the *Rambam* (*hilchot Chanukah* 4:12) writes that the *mitzvah* of the lighting the *menorah* is extremely beloved and special. Are not all *mitzvot* beloved and special in *Hashem's* Eyes?
- The *Rambam* (*ibid.* 3:3) writes that we light the *menorah* "*leharot ulegalot haness,*" to demonstrate and reveal the miracle. What are these two concepts referring to?

Chanukah* not in *Tnach

Although *Chanukah* is mentioned in passing in a few places in *shass*, it is the only *yomtov* that is not recorded in the *Torah* or *Nach*. This is because it happened after the period of prophecy had already ended. And so, it could not be written down in a divinely-inspired way. To be included in *Tnach*, a *sefer* must be written *beruach hakodesh*, through Divine inspiration, to ensure that no word or letter is superfluous. Thus, unlike all the *chagim*, such as *Pesach, Sukkot* and *Purim*, which are recorded in *Tnach*, we have no historical recording of *Chanukah*.

Therefore, the *Gemara* needed to address the most basic question regarding this *yomtov*, which we do not find regarding any other *yomtov* – "what is it?" Although *Chanukah* is not recorded in *Tnach*, we do find it mentioned in *Megillat Antiochus* and *Midrash Chanukah*. Accordingly, we may suggest that this is the difference between *Rashi* and the *Rambam*. The *Rambam* understands that since there is no mention of *Chanukah* in *Tnach*, the *Talmud Bavli* needed to discuss exactly what it is. It therefore asks the most basic



question, “*mai Chanukah*, what is *Chanukah*?” as if we have no prior knowledge of it, and must be taught about it. *Rashi*, on the other hand, understands that although it is not recorded in *Tnach*, since it is mentioned by *Chazal* in *Midrashim*, it is not so foreign that the *Talmud Bavli* needs to ask what it is. Thus, *Rashi* understands the *Gemara’s* question to be, “for which miracle did *Chazal* see fit to institute this festival?” We know that the *Chashmonayim* fought and miraculously won the war against the Greeks, even though they were only a few untrained and weak soldiers fighting against a mighty army, with all odds against them, they still won the war. Although this was not an openly nature-defying miracle, it nevertheless demonstrated *Hashem’s* Divine Intervention within nature. On the other hand, the miracle of the oil clearly defied nature. And so, the *Gemara* asks, for which miracle did *Chazal* establish the *yomtov* of *Chanukah*?

After hearing the options of understanding the *Gemara’s* opening question, let us discuss each one and its follow-on:

***Rashi’s* Approach**

Rashi understood that the *Gemara* knew what *Chanukah* was, but was discussing which miracle caused *Chazal* to institute it as a *yomtov*. The *Gemara* explains that due to the open miracle of the oil lasting eight days.

After discussing what prompted *Chazal* to establish this *yomtov*, it does not necessarily follow that the way to perpetuate the miracle would be done in the same way. *Rashi* understood that due to the open miracle, *Chazal* fixed these as days of *hallel* and *hodaah*. *Hallel* means saying the complete *hallel* for eight days, remembering the miracle. And *hodaah*, saying “*al hanissim*” about *Chanukah* in *shemoneh esreh*. Additionally, *Rashi* (*Shabbat* 24a) comments that the main essence of *Chanukah* is *hodaah*, i.e., the *al hanissim* prayer. Interestingly enough, although the *Gemara* mentioned the miracle of the oil, which was an open miracle, the “*al hanissim*” prayer only mentions the miracles of the battles, which are more within nature. No mention is made in it of the miracle of the oil. *Chazal* understood that from this time onwards, we would not merit seeing anymore open nature-defying miracles. Therefore, to contain the message of *Chanukah* for all future generations, it was essential to emphasize the miracles of the war, which did not openly defy nature. These types of miracles will continue right throughout our *galut*, our exile. If one pays attention to it, one can discern *Hashem’s* guiding Hand operating through nature, directing our nation as a whole, and each individual as well. The main message of *Chanukah* is embodied in the *avodah* of saying “*al hanissim*.” According to *Rashi*, we light a *menorah* to remember the open miracle that *Hashem* performed for us, but this is not the main message of *Chanukah*.



We still need to explain why if the festival was fixed due to an open miracle, the way of commemorating it is mainly through “*al hanissim*,” which relates to the miracles within nature?

Hallel and Hodaah

To understand this, let us first define the difference between *hallel* and *hodaah*. *Hallel* was instituted to be said praising *Hashem* for the open miracles He performed for us (see the *Maharsha Shabbat* 118b). *Al hanissim*, as mentioned, relates to *nissim nistarim*, the miracles within nature. We first say *hallel*, which makes us aware and enables us to thank *Hashem* for seeing His miraculous Hand. The purpose and goal of open miracles is for us to internalise and appreciate that essentially everything is miraculous. Even nature, which is *Hashem*'s way of ensuring a constant system and order in the world, is also miraculous. The *Ramban* (*Shemot* 13:16) teaches us that the purpose of open miracles is so that we will appreciate that all of nature is miraculous. Hence, we start with the *avodah* of *hallel*, thanking *Hashem* for the open miracles, to enable us to get to the *avodah* of “*al hanissim*,” internalising that really everything is miraculous. Since the message of “*al hanissim*” is our main *avodah*, although the kick-start for *Chazal*'s fixing *Chanukah* as a *yomtov* was the open miracle of the oil, the essence of the *yomtov* is *hodaah* – thanking *Hashem* for all His kindnesses that He miraculously does for us, within nature and above it.

Rambam's Approach

The *Rambam* understood the *Gemara*'s question as simply saying, “*mai Chanukah*, what is *Chanukah*?” Although we may have learnt about it from other sources besides *Tnach*, the *Rambam* understood that the *Talmud Bavli* was not relying on that. The *Rambam* himself, when writing the “*yad hachazakah*” as a *Mishneh Torah*, intended that a person would learn *Tnach*, and then go straight to *Mishneh Torah* (see the *Rambam*, at end of introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*). Thus, the *Rambam* begins *Hilchot Chanukah* by quoting our *Gemara* of “*mai Chanukah*.” This explains why its title is *hilchot Chanukah*, and not the *halachot* of its *mitzvah*, as with the other *chagim*, where he does not explain their background, since they can be found in *Tnach*.

This also explains why the *Rambam* writes the *halachot* of *Chanukah* after those of *Purim*, even though chronologically *Chanukah* comes before *Purim* in the Jewish year, because unlike all the other *chagim*, it starts by describing its origins.

Now that we have established that the *Rambam* understands the *Gemara* as simply asking, “What is *Chanukah*?” the *Gemara* answers by mentioning the salvation from the Greeks, the open miracle that



transpired with the oil, and the *Chachamim*'s decision to fix these days for *hallel* and *hodaah*. *Hallel* refers to saying the complete *hallel* every day of *Chanukah*. But what is meant by *hodaah*? It cannot refer to saying "*al hanissim*," as *Rashi* explains, since the *Rambam* makes no mention of it in *hilchot Chanukah*. (He only mentions saying "*al hanissim*" on *Chanukah* in *hilchot berachot* and *hilchot tefillah*.) It is clear from the *Rambam* (unlike *Rashi*) that the *Gemara* is not discussing for which miracle *Chazal* fixed *Chanukah*. Rather, it is describing what happened, how the Jewish People were saved from the Greek persecution, culminating with the miracle of the oil. The *Rambam* learns that the *hodaah* is the lighting of the *menorah*, as an acknowledgement of that great miracle. Our Sages fixed these days for giving thanks to *Hashem* for all His kindness, and especially the open miracle of the oil, by saying *hallel* and lighting the *menorah* for eight days.

We may understand the two objectives mentioned by the *Rambam*, as follows: *Leharot*, to show oneself the open miracles that *Hashem* did for us, and *legalot*, to show others and publicly announce those open miracles. The miracles of the war are treated as being secondary, and as such, are not celebrated. They are mentioned in the "*al hanissim*" praise of *Chanukah* that we say in *shemoneh esreh*.

Tosafot's Approach

We may deduce that *Tosafot* (24a) has the same understanding here as *Rashi*. The *Gemara* (*ibid.*) discusses saying "*al hanissim*" in *birkat hamazon*. *Tosafot* asks "why did the *Gemara* wait until now to discuss this? Surely, its place in the *sugya* of *Chanukah* topics, *hallel* and *hodaah* (21b)?" According to *Rashi*, this question is valid. But, according to the *Rambam*, the saying of "*al hanissim*" is not a *Chanukah* topic. It is just an opportunity to mention the special day in our prayer, but not the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *hodaah* that our Sages instituted. It is therefore discussed later on.

Chavivah Ad Meod

The *Rambam* concludes his *hilchot Chanukah* with an expression that he does not use regarding any other *mitzvah* – The *mitzvah* of the *Chanukah* lights is "*chavivah ad meod*," is a very precious *mitzvah*.

Although we know that all *mitzvot* are precious (*Ramban Shemot* 13:6), this one is different. All other *mitzvot* bring one to thank *Hashem*. Through their fulfillment, one understands and appreciates the need to be grateful to *Hashem* for everything. However, the *mitzvah* of lighting the *menorah* is different. It is not that it brings one to *hodaah*, but the actual lighting, the actual *mitzvah* is a *hodaah* to *Hashem*. Hence, it has an extra *chavivut*, an extra endearment to *Hashem*, more than any other *mitzvah*.



The Miracle of the Oil

As explained, according to *Rashi*, the miracle of the *menorah* oil was what inspired *Chazal* to fix the festival of *Chanukah*, more than all the other miracles that transpired. And also, according to the *Rambam*, the *Gemara* answers the question of “*mai Chanukah*” only mentioning the miracle of the oil, but not the other miracles that *Hashem* graciously did for us.

Let us understand, why was the miracle of the oil lasting for eight days more significant than any of the other miracles?

When the *Chashmonaim* entered the *Bet Hamikdash*, they only found one flask of ritually-pure oil. It would take seven days until they could bring more oil. In such a situation, the *halachah* is that “*tuma hutra betzibur*,” we allow the public offering to be brought, despite its state of ritual impurity. Since all of the oil has been defiled and was ritually impure, it was halachically permissible for them to light with impure oil. Alternatively, explains the *Bet Halevi (Chanukah al haTorah)*, instead of using wicks of normal thickness, they could have thinned them down, so that the oil would last longer. However, the *Chashmonaim* understood that the decree annulling the *avodah* in the *Bet Hamikdash* had come about because of their slackening in it. This decree was an indication of where they had to strengthen themselves. The point where *Hashem* makes a decree against us, is where we need correcting (see the *Bach siman 671*). They understood, therefore, that they needed to show *mesirut nefesh* specifically in this area, to atone for what been lacking, and reset their values and appreciation for the *avodah* of the *Bet Hamikdash*. It was not the time to rely on leniencies, even though halachically-speaking they would have been allowed to. They had to demonstrate a non-compromising approach, demanding only the best for the *avodah*. Thus, this miracle was particularly significant to them, as it showed that their *teshuvah* for slackening in the *avodah*, had been accepted. The other miracles had to come to ensure their continued existence, but the miracle with the oil was an extra. It was an act of endearment to them from *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. This is why this miracle was chosen as the reason for instituting *Chanukah*.

Mehadrin, Mehadrin min haMehadrin

We may now explain why the concept of *hiddur* is given such importance in conjunction with the lighting of the *menorah*. Normally a “*hiddur mitzvah – zeh keli ve’anvehu*” is done by using nicer materials or a more beautiful object, thereby glorifying the *mitzvah*. Here, however, the *hiddur* is demonstrated by fulfilling the *mitzvah* in a different way. Moreover, the *Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 671:2)* does not even mention the basic level of fulfilling the *mitzvah*, only the “*mehadrin*” and “*mehadrin min hamehadrin*” ways of doing so.



This could be because our *avodah* on *Chanukah* is to show how precious and non-transferable our service of *Hashem* is. Like then they did not rely on any 'letter of the law' but went over and above, there is a very good reason also that we should follow suit. We only want to do it in the best way, thereby demonstrating how much we cherish the *avodah*, an act of *teshuvah* in the area of our downfall.

Chanukah versus Purim

The *Bach* (*siman* 671) shows us how the rabbinical festival of *Chanukah* is a different to that of *Purim*. At the time of *Purim* the Jews fell prey to their desires by partaking of *Achashverosh's* party. Therefore, corresponding to their failure, the decree of annihilation was against their *guf*, their bodies that had partaken of the feast. Thus, their form of *teshuvah* also involved their *guf*, "*tzumu alai*" – go and fast in repentance. Their salvation was that their *guf* was saved from annihilation. Hence, its celebration is with our body, celebrating and partaking of food and wine. On *Chanukah*, however, our failure was of a spiritual nature, because we slackened in our service of *Hashem* in the *Bet Hamikdash*. Thus, the decree was to prevent us performing these holy *mitzvot*, and the *Bet Hamikdash* was defiled. Our repentance was to show our desire to restore our spiritual standing, and to fight for it. When we were "*moser nefesh*" for it, *Hashem* graciously restored the *avodah* to the *Bet Hamikdash*. Hence, our form of celebration is more on a spiritual note, lighting the *menorah*, which is symbolic of the light of our *neshamah* being rekindled and saying *hallel* and *hodaah*.

Avodat Chanukah

The *Bach* ends off, "therefore, our *avodah* is '*hallel vehodaah*,' which are *avodot shebelev*, services of the heart." This requires explanation. If our failure was in our service of *Hashem*, and this is where we witnessed our salvation, surely, our *avodah* on *Chanukah* should be to increase our *avodat Hashem*. Why then do we not celebrate by learning more or fulfilling more *mitzvot*? And why does the *Bach* write that our duty is to increase our *avodat halev*, duties of the heart? The answer is that if one just does more acts of *mitzvot*, although this is positive, we will not have corrected the root of the problem. Only when a person internalises our duties of the heart, will it then spill over and increase our true level of commitment, since it is backed by sincerity and understanding. To add on dry actions, will fizzle out in the long run. But to ignite our hearts as to the need for more *avodat Hashem* is the long-term route to success in strengthening our commitment.

Let us utilise these holy days of light to appreciate the message of the miracle of the *menorah*, and thereby internalise that nature is also miraculous. This will greatly enhance our *avodat Hashem*, by ensuring our hearts are in place.